

Chapter 1 Beach

Jess Leclair was struggling to stay awake. As the teacher's voiced droned on, she slipped lower down her chair and closer towards unconsciousness.

'Je-ess.'

The soft, sing-song voice in her ear made her sit bolt upright. She brushed her long dark fringe out of her eyes and squinted in the sunlight reflecting off the water.

'What on Earth are you listening to?' Jess's mother asked, holding the earbud she'd prised out of Jess's ear up to her own ear.

'I'm not sure. Sounds Asian. Maybe the user manual in Chinese?' said Jess, making a show of grimacing at the screen of her PEPpad as she closed the app for her Chinese Political History lecture, in Mandarin.

'Anyway,' continued Mrs Leclair, fiddling with her watch, 'it's time to meet your father for the winery tour. Are you sure you don't want to come?'

Jess shook her head. The thought of being stuck on a bus ambling through the French countryside with a heap of dentists and their spouses did not appeal, especially since she was too young to even sample the wine.

'I'm sure they'll have some great cheeses to taste,' encouraged Mrs Leclair.

'No thanks, Mum,' said Jess. 'You and Dad enjoy.'

'Well, I'll have my phone with me in case you need me. And it's probably time to put on more sunscreen.'

'Thanks, Mum,' said Jess as Mrs Leclair leant over to kiss her cheek.

Jess rubbed sunscreen on her arms, watching her mother walk back to the hotel. That had been close. If the recorded lesson had been in English, or Arabic or French for that matter, Mrs Leclair would not be getting ready for the winery tour. She would be grilling Jess on why she was listening to a lecture on Chinese politics at the turn of the millennium, which would have led to questions about her school, which would have led to Jess's expulsion and a family dose of Memory Wipe.

Jess was no ordinary teenager, and her boarding school, Theruse Abbey, was no ordinary school. Set in the remote west of Ireland, the abbey was isolated by design. What went on there had to remain secret, as Theruse was the training ground for recruits to P.E.P. Squad, the most secret spy organisation in the world. As well as standard subjects in the Irish senior cycle curriculum, Jess and her classmates were taught essential espionage skills, underwent rigorous physical training and spoke a minimum of seven languages. Only a few of the students' parents had any idea of what went on at the abbey, and that was only because they were members of P.E.P. Squad themselves.

Amazingly, to her mind, Jess had topped her first year class, despite achieving only borderline results in Chinese. She was using her time basking on the beach in the south of France, where her father had been invited to speak at a dental conference, to brush up on her Mandarin. Freshman year was going to be even more demanding than Transition year, and she needed to be up to speed.

As Jess dropped the sunscreen back into her beach bag her phone rang. Expecting it to be her mum, Jess was surprised when *Private Number* flashed up on the screen.

'Hello. 'Allo?' she said in English and in French.

‘Jess,’ said a familiar voice, ‘you’re in serious trouble. Pack up your stuff and walk back to the hotel and do *not* look left. I mean don’t look right. Just ... just look straight ahead.’

‘Fine,’ sighed Jess, amazed that P.E.P. Squad had found out about her indiscretion with the Chinese lesson so quickly. She bundled her towel into her beach bag, and was just about to drop the phone in when it rang again.

‘Yeah,’ she said.

‘Jess,’ said the voice. ‘Maybe you have a different take on the word *serious*, but do not hang up.’

‘What’s the rush?’ asked Jess, shouldering her beach bag and walking back towards the hotel. ‘How did they find out about my mum hearing the lecture so quickly? And why are *you* talking to me, not one of the teachers?’

‘Seriously, Jess. There’s a hostile three seats to your left, and we’re trying to get you somewhere safe. Do exactly as I say.’

Jess felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. Using every ounce of self-control she kept her face forward and did not break into a run.

‘Go into the lobby.’

As Jess picked her way through the rows of deck chairs on the hotel’s private beach, she noticed movement to her left. She could see a man reflected in the lens of her oversized sunglasses heading her way. He had a towel draped over his arm, which he held in front of him at an odd angle, as though he were concealing...

‘I think he’s armed,’ Jess squeaked into the phone.

‘We know,’ said the voice. ‘Just keep your cool. When you enter the lobby, head right. There’s a door marked *Staff Only*. Go through it.’

Jess walked into the lobby, the air conditioning chilling the sweat that had broken out all over her body. She crossed to the door and reached for the handle.

‘Once you’re through the door,’ continued the voice on the phone, ‘run.’

Jess pushed the door open and found herself in a service corridor. The walls were lined with wire shelving units, housing everything from towels and sheets to crockery and cutlery. She sprinted down the corridor.

‘What now?’ she asked, surprised at how calm her voice sounded.

‘The kitchen’s the last door on the left.’

The instruction was almost drowned out by the door slamming against the wall as Jess’s pursuer barged through it. Jess turned and was surprised to recognise him.

‘He’s from Altganz,’ she gasped.

‘We know,’ said the voice.

But Jess hardly heard. She was looking at the gun pointed at her.

She grasped one of the shelving units and heaved. The unit and all the plates on it clattered to the floor as Jess turned and ran. She dived through the kitchen door. It felt like diving into an oven. It was approaching lunchtime and everything was in full swing. Pots were bubbling on the stoves, delicious smells were wafting from the ovens and there was noise everywhere as senior chefs yelled at junior chefs and kitchen hands.

‘I’m in the kitchen,’ she said into the phone. ‘Where do I go?’

‘Pistolet!’ one of the kitchen staff yelled.

The entire staff hit the deck. Jess ducked down too.

‘He’s here. Where do I go?’ she hissed into the phone as she scrambled between the benches.

‘Take the northeast exit,’ replied the voice.

‘I can’t tell which way’s north. I’m inside.’

‘Opposite wall to the door you came in, and left.’

Jess scurried along, keeping low. She got to the end of the bench and glanced towards the northeast exit. It was a fire escape double door with a release bar rather than a handle. That was the good news. The bad news was that she had to cross a patch of unprotected space to reach it, which would make her an easy target.

She’d been in a similar situation before, albeit in a virtual reality computer game. That time she’d used a move the actors in her dad’s favourite martial arts movies favoured. Rather than running, they covered ground with a series of cartwheels and flips. Jess decided to do the same. Starting from a sprinting position she took a short run-up then did two handsprings and an aerial somersault, her feet grazing the release bar as she hit the door. The doors flew outwards, and Jess went feet first through them, just as she felt rather than heard a bullet whizz past her left ear.

Instead of landing in a cobblestoned alley, Jess fell in through the side door of a blue van which was perfectly aligned with the exit door. The van door slid shut and the vehicle powered away with a squeal of tyres. Jess struggled to her knees and peered out the rear window in time to see her pursuer emerge from the kitchen into the alley and take aim at the van, but before he could fire, a figure ran at him from behind and rammed a syringe into his neck. The would-be assassin fell to the ground and got bundled into a second blue van.

Only then did Jess turn to the other occupant of the van.

‘Looks like I owe you one,’ she said.